‘Escalante massacre turned into peace miracle’: army official

By Nanette Guadalquiver September 21, 2019, 4:29 pm
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OATH OF ALLEGIANCE. A total of 2,510 former rebels and supporters of the New People’s Army in northern Negros pledge allegiance to the Philippine government in rites held at the Escalante City Coliseum on Friday afternoon (Sept. 20, 2019). The activity was part of the second day of the three-day North Negros Peace Summit hosted by the Escalante city government with the Philippine Army’s 79th Infantry Battalion. *(PNA photo by Nanette L. Guadalquiver)*

ESCALANTE CITY -- In what can be considered as the biggest mass surrender in Negros Occidental so far, a total of 2,510 former rebels and members of the New People’s Army (NPA) took their oath of allegiance to the Philippine government here on Friday afternoon.

The surrender took place during the second day of the three-day North Negros Peace Summit hosted by the city government with the Philippine Army’s 79th Infantry Battalion.

“We are very fortunate to witness one of the nation’s milestones in achieving peace today. We will turn the Escalante Massacre tragedy into a peace summit miracle,” said Brig. Gen. Eric Vinoya, assistant division commander of the 3rd Infantry Division (3ID), in his keynote message during the program held at the Escalante City Coliseum.

The event also commemorated the 34th year of the Escalante Massacre, where 20 people died and scores of others were injured after they were shot by paramilitary forces during a protest-rally held a day before the 13th anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law.

One of the surrenderers, Janet Pantonial, now in her 50s, was one of those injured in the 1985 massacre and has decided to make peace with the government.

In her testimony, she has expressed willingness to avail of the services of various government agencies.

Vinoya said “the tragedy was used by left-leaning organizations to fuel hatred and disgust against the duly-constituted government to push their wicked agenda.”

“The time is now to move on and transform the lesson of the past to be our jumping board for a better future. With the help of the agencies, organizations, and the whole nation, we will achieve genuine, inclusive and sustainable peace,” the army official added.

Of the 2,510 former rebels who pledged allegiance before Escalante City Local Government Operations Officer Sharon Cadigai, a majority or 997 were from Escalante.

Others were from San Carlos City, 560; Toboso, 382; Don Salvador Benedicto, 217; Calatrava, 171; Sagay City, 63; Victorias City, 54; Cadiz City, 20; Murcia, 18; EB Magalona, 14; Manapla, 13; and Silay City, 1.

Mayor Melecio Yap Jr. of the host-city said the process of surrender of those from Escalante started as early as November last year.

He added that civilian agents, including psychologists and lawyers, assisted the surrenderers during the debriefing to help them cope with their fear of returning to the fold of the law.

During the program, government authorities also apologized for the tragedy brought by the Escalante Massacre. Those who delivered statements of apologies were Executive Assistant Rolyn Cabus; Maj. Win Love Bag-ao, commander of 33rd Civil-Military Operations Company; and Col. Romeo Baleros, director of Negros Occidental Police Provincial Office.

In a statement, the 3ID said the “Army is not in any way involved in the massacre, but we do accept the fact that the government failed to address the social issues being raised by the peasants and the marginalized sector, which prompted them to revolt during that time.”

Former rebel James “Ka Joros" Durimon who surrendered last April, also apologized for the atrocities committed by the NPA.

The 21-year-old, once a member of the Special Partisan Unit or SPARU of the Northern Negros Front, acknowledged that he was part of the hit squad who had gunned down a number of victims.

Durimon also led the turnover of 41 firearms to Vinoya as part of the surrender rites.

The ceremony was also witnessed by Mayors Richard Jaojoco of Toboso, Marilyn Era of Calatrava, Laurence Marxlen de la Cruz of Don Salvador Benedicto, together with former 1st District congressman Julio Ledesma IV; Assistant Secretary Jonji Gonzales of the Office of the Presidential Assistant for the Visayas; Brig. Gen. Benedict Arevalo, commander of 303rd Infantry Brigade; Land Bank of the Philippines director Jesus Hinlo, who represented Senator Christopher Lawrence Go; and actor Robin Padilla, a reservist captain of the Philippine Army. ***(PNA)***